FCNDP No. 171

FCND DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 171

LIVING LIFE: OVERLOOKED ASPECTS OF URBAN EMPLOYMENT

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January 2004

Abstract

With urban dwellers purchasing 80 percent or more of their food, understanding urban employment is critical to designing policies and programs to address urban hunger and poverty. Reviewing the literature, but also using data from household surveys conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and others in five countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, this paper profiles urban employment in developing-country cities. It highlights some often-overlooked aspects of urban conditions, most especially the importance of agriculture, the continuing importance of the formal sector, and seasonality of income, even among those not connected to agriculture. It also examines the connections between poverty and employment; looks at where people work and what they do; and highlights the importance of personal networks, the informal sector, and the concerns of women. Finally, it notes some dynamic forces shaping the future of urban employment and suggests some guidelines for policies and programs.

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This study was funded in part by the United Kingdom Department for International Development. I greatly appreciate research assistance received from Manuel Felix and Wahid Quabili, and comments and support from Lisa Smith and Manfred Schulz.

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Key words: employment, urban, hunger, poverty

1. Introduction

Understanding urban employment is critical to designing policies and programs to reduce urban hunger and poverty. More than rural folk, urban dwellers need paying jobs. Growing their own food is sometimes possible, but home gardens cannot take care of all requirements. Even urban farmers who grow high-value crops like fruits and vegetables still need cash to buy staples like rice, millet, or wheat flour. Residents of megacities and large metropolitan areas generally purchase more than 90 percent of their food. The percentage for those who live outside the largest cities is less, but usually much more than that for rural dwellers, who frequently buy less than half their food (Table 1).

Table 1—Purchased food as a percentage of total food value

	Food		
	Metro areas	**Other urban areas**	**Rural**
Egypt	98	95	85
Malawi	91	90	36
Mozambique	92	73	29
Nepal	94	78	42
Peru	92	89	58

Note: Data sources for Egypt, Malawi, and Peru described in the text. Mozambique (national), 1996–97: Ministry of Planning and Finance and National Statistics Institute. Nepal (national), 1996: Central Bureau of Statistics.

To enrich our understanding of urban employment, this paper presents profiles of urban employment in developing-country cities drawn from the literature as well as data from household surveys conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and others. It challenges some common perceptions of urban employment and highlights some often-overlooked aspects of urban conditions. It examines the connections between poverty and employment. It looks at where people work and what they do. It highlights the importance of personal networks, the informal sector, and the concerns of women. Finally, it notes some dynamic forces shaping the future of urban employment and suggests some guidelines for policies and programs.

Data for the study are from surveys conducted in the mid- to late 1990s in five countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The countries are Bangladesh, Egypt, Ghana, Malawi, and Peru. Data from Egypt, Malawi, and Peru are from nationally-

representative surveys. Data from Bangladesh are from slum areas in two cities, Jessore and Tongi. Jessore is a market city located in southwest Bangladesh, close to the Indian border. It has approximately 270,000 people. Trade is an important economic driver. Tongi is an industrial city 25 kilometers north of Dhaka City. Many of its inhabitants work in the neighboring mills and factories. Although probably officially somewhat smaller than Jessore, Tongi sits on the outskirts of Dhaka, a megacity of 10 million people. Thus, in terms of urban conditions, it is much more like a very large city than Jessore. The data from Ghana are from a representative city-sample of Accra.[1]

2. The Working Poor: Connections Between Employment and Poverty

Cities are important engines of growth and employment. With a centralization of infrastructure, population, and markets, cities provide economies of scale for investment, readily available support services and inputs, ease of transport and communication, and access to a diverse and skilled labor force. They are hubs of intellectual, business, political, cultural, and social life (DfID 2001; ILO 1998). For the promise of the city to be realized, however, the opportunities of the cities must reach the poor.

At first glance, the picture seems relatively bright. Other sources have found that unemployment rates in cities are usually fairly low (Oberai 1993), and the household survey data used in this study generally support this assertion (Table 2). Except for Malawi, unemployment rates were mostly 10 percent or less, even in slum areas of Bangladesh. Unemployment rates for the poorest third (expressed as the lowest tercile of consumption expenditure) in Accra and Lima were somewhat higher, at about 15 percent. On the other hand, unemployment in the cities of Malawi was substantially higher than in

[1] Sources for the data: Bangladesh (slums in Jessore and Tongi), 2000: CARE with IFPRI; Egypt (national), 1997: Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Ministry of Trade and Supply, IFPRI; Ghana (Accra), 1997: Noguchi Memorial Institute of Medical Research, Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research, IFPRI; Malawi (national), 1997–98: National Statistical Office, National Economic Council; Peru (national), 1994: Instituto Cuanto and the World Bank.

Table 2—Unemployment and number of full- or part-time jobs

	Unemployment rate			Only one job			35 hours or more of work		
	Male	Female	Overall	Male	Female	Overall	Male	Female	Overall
Bangladesh									
Jessore slums	6	3	5	92	99	94	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Tongi slums	6	2	4	94	98	95	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Egypt									
Metro areas	2	5	3	96	100	97	92	96	93
Lowest expenditure tercile	2	2	2	96	100	97	90	97	92
Other urban areas	2	3	2	91	97	92	88	91	89
Lowest expenditure tercile	3	4	3	88	95	89	84	85	84
Ghana									
Accra	11	12	11	83	87	85	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Lowest expenditure tercile	11	15	14	87	90	88	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Malawi									
Blantyre City	17	26	20	99	99	99	92	84	90
Lowest expenditure tercile	23	52	30	99	96	99	94	62	89
Other urban areas	17	16	17	99	95	98	92	76	87
Lowest expenditure tercile	20	23	21	98	100	98	90	60	81
Peru									
Lima	10	11	10	87	92	89	75	55	67
Lowest expenditure tercile	12	18	15	89	95	91	75	48	65
Other urban areas	5	5	5	90	91	90	80	61	72
Lowest expenditure tercile	6	6	6	91	91	91	75	54	67

Note: n.a. = not available.

other countries. There, one-third of the poorest third were unemployed, as were half of all women. In general, though, while rates are not especially low, they are not spectacularly high. This runs counter to the notion of high and widespread unemployment among developing-country city residents, especially the poor.

But perhaps the poor simply are not working full-time or have to cobble together their livelihoods by holding many jobs simultaneously. The data appear to show that this is not the case either. The poor do not tend to scurry from job to job each day, and underemployment among those participating in the workforce, if defined as working less than 35 hours per week, is not widespread. In fact, some of these people may be working less than full-time voluntarily. Generally, less than 10 percent of working men and women reported having a second job. When asked in focus groups about other jobs, Bangladeshi slum dwellers wondered, “Do you think we have time to do anything else?” This may be due to the fact that many workers, even casual laborers, tend to see themselves as having a particular profession, not as simply day laborers or wage workers

that hop from job to job. In addition, the large majority of workers worked at least 35 hours a week. Ninety percent or more of urban Egyptians and Malawians did, although urban Peruvians were somewhat less likely to have done so. Women and those in cities other than major metropolitan areas were also less likely to work full-time.

The low unemployment rates and high proportion of full-time workers support the idea that urban dwellers have no choice but to work. But, in fact, participation rates are not that high. Only 50–80 percent of working-age men are in the labor force. Women's participation rates are much lower. Rates of participation from these surveys do not show much variation by city size, but rates for the poorest third are close to the overall figures or, surprisingly, given an assumed need of the poor for a job, somewhat lower. Gauging by these relatively low participation rates, many of the poor, in fact, do not work.

Cultural constraints as well as social expectations, such as women taking care of housework and children, may lower women's participation in the labor force. At the same time, economic opportunity draws some women into jobs, and this work may begin to ease some of the cultural barriers by providing examples of what women can do. In Bangladesh, for instance, 36 percent of the women of the slums of Tongi worked. They are participating in new ways in the recently risen garment industry in Bangladesh. As expected with this scenario, women's rates of participation were lower in the less metropolitan, more traditional urban center of Jessore.

Although in urban areas children may work long hours in the streets or in factories, in general, the participation rates of children are low (Table 3). This is true even for the poorest families, where only 5–10 percent of children in Egypt, Ghana, and Peru reported having or seeking a job. The slums of Bangladesh are an exceptional case: there, 15–20 percent of children are in the labor force. In Egypt and Bangladesh, boys had a far greater tendency to be in the labor force than girls, but the figures were similar for boys and girls in Ghana and Peru. These statistics mirror results from Mumbai, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro, where previous studies showed less than 2 percent of children working (Oberai 1993).

Table 3—Participation rates, children and working-age adults

	Children			Working age adults		
	Male	**Female**	**Overall**	**Male**	**Female**	**Overall**
Bangladesh						
Jessore slums	25	4	15	81	24	53
Tongi slums	23	16	19	83	36	59
Egypt						
Metro areas	1	0	1	65	19	41
Lowest expenditure tercile	3	0	1	67	18	42
Other urban areas	9	2	5	65	19	43
Lowest expenditure tercile	13	4	8	64	12	39
Ghana						
Accra	3	4	4	74	56	62
Lowest expenditure tercile	6	6	6	72	45	55
Malawi						
Blantyre City	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	55	21	39
Lowest expenditure tercile				48	8	27
Other urban areas	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	55	25	41
Lowest expenditure tercile				51	22	37
Peru						
Lima	5	7	6	69	38	51
Lowest expenditure tercile	4	4	4	71	34	50
Other urban areas	9	7	8	70	42	55
Lowest expenditure tercile	12	10	11	68	39	53

Note: n.a. = not available.

Overall, if one argues that the poor must have a job to survive, these findings pose a puzzle. Not all those who can work do. Therefore, low rates of unemployment and the consistent reporting of "full-time" work may not mean that everyone who wants a job can have one, but that many have become discouraged and withdrawn from the economically active population. Future surveys must look more carefully at urban employment, and these surveys must be complemented by qualitative studies. They should probe more deeply to see whether respondents are simply not reporting other income-earning activities or they have simply stopped searching for a job.

Because average participation rates of the better-off are not dramatically different from those of the poorest (and in Malawi are actually higher), the findings suggest that the greatest differences in the groups are in the quality and level of remuneration of employment. For the poorest, even for those who have a job, work can be uncertain, secure for only a day or two at a time. Factories may hire on a daily basis; and rains,

political violence, or illness can interrupt work. For example, in the slums of Jessore, unemployment was relatively low—around 5 percent. But workers lost an average of 10 days of work a month. On average, workers lost four of those days because of bad weather and strikes called by the political opposition. They lost another three days because they were sick and another two because "work was not available" (CARE-IFPRI 2001). The uncertainty of earnings is perhaps the greatest threat to a secure urban livelihood.

Faced with such uncertainties, most poor households earn income in a variety of ways, not only through jobs, but also through remittances from others or transfers from government or social agencies. Recent research on urban livelihoods in Ghana and in Zimbabwe shows that, in contrast to rural areas, in urban areas diversification of income sources increases with adversity. The urban poor commonly have a greater number of income sources than the better-off (Ersado 2002; Maxwell et al. 2000).

In the developing world, then, unemployment does not mirror poverty, as it does more consistently in the North (Naher 2002). Poverty and employment entwine, not because there are "no jobs" (across income classes, unemployment rates are not dramatically different) but because jobs are of low quality: insecure, uncertain, low paying. This holds true across the formal and informal sectors. Without better and higher paying jobs, the urban promise fades.

3. Profiles of Employment

The diversity of jobs in cities is well known: government, factory, or office worker; fishmonger; street vendor; tailor; maid; rickshaw driver; farmer; beggar. But from such variety, patterns of employment emerge. The patterns vary with city size, income, and gender. This paper highlights three often-overlooked aspects of urban employment: the importance of agriculture; the importance of formal-sector jobs, even to the poor; and seasonal variations in income, even among those not connected to the agricultural sector. The surveys do not capture the significance of income gained through

illegal activities, such as bribery, smuggling, and prostitution, although these are undoubtedly important to the livelihoods of many urban dwellers.

Any discussion of urban employment should recognize differences among cities of different sizes. Larger metropolitan areas and megacities of over 10 million exude a sense of urbanity: crowds, dense settlement, multitudes of concrete structures and highways, traffic, pollution, and little agriculture. Small and medium-size cities possess more rural characteristics. Drawing clean lines between urban and rural is practically impossible: in Bangladesh, "rural" areas still have an average density of over 1,200 persons per square kilometer (ADB 2002), while in Sub-Saharan Africa, small towns may be classified as "urban" even when they have only a few thousand inhabitants, because of their administrative characteristics or infrastructure (Tacoli 1998).

Despite the association of urbanity with large cites, the fact is that few countries have many truly large cities. Half of the urban population in developing countries lives in cities of less than 500,000; only 16 percent live in cities of 5 million or more, with a heavy concentration of these in Asia. The smaller cities will absorb by far the largest share of urban growth in the next 15 years. Forty percent of growth will occur in these smaller cities, while 30 percent will occur in cities of 1–5 million (United Nations 2001).

Most of the urban population in developing countries, then, will be from these smaller cities whose patterns diverge from those of larger metropolitan areas (Blitzer et al. 1988). Smaller cities naturally tend to combine urban and rural social, economic, and physical characteristics (Rondinelli 1982), with strong links to the agricultural and food system. As befits cities in the middle, they span the urban-rural divide and perform functions found in both cities and countryside. Dominated by commercial and service activities (though these may be small and not especially competitive with large industries in more metropolitan areas), they may have a large manufacturing sector. Agriculture is a visible force in the economy. Large numbers of people are directly involved in agriculture production, as laborers or producers. Merchants and mechanics provide agricultural inputs and tools. Traders dynamically connect city and countryside.

These small and intermediate cities contribute a smaller share to national output than the percentage of the national population they hold would suggest (Rondinelli 1982), but they are significant to national life. They are the urban centers with which most people interact. While nationally they may play a smaller role, regionally they are quite important (UNCHS 1985). Their development possibilities must be understood in the context of their links to the hinterland and with other urban centers (UNCHS 1985).

This paper examines these differences in city size by distinguishing between the largest cities in each country and "other" urban areas (for those surveys using national-level data).[2] This division illustrates the fuzziness of the rural-urban transition and highlights differences and similarities between those areas typically thought of as urban and those thought of as rural, even when these areas have large populations (often exceeding 100,000).

Agriculture in the Cities

Agriculture, forestry, and fishing are still important to the incomes of many urban dwellers, especially outside large metropolitan areas. In addition, even in the largest cities, many workers earn their living indirectly from agricultural-based enterprises, such as transportation, processing, or food selling. Urban businesses also provide agricultural inputs, like seeds, chemicals, tools, and machinery. The surveys showed that in some cities, a surprising number of households continued to be producers (Table 4). Even in large metropolitan areas, 2–3 percent of urban dwellers earned a living from agriculture. In Lima, almost 10 percent of workers (mostly men) earned a living from farming or fishing. Outside these cities, the numbers jumped: agriculture was the main livelihood for almost 10 percent of urban dwellers outside major metropolitan areas in Egypt and

[2] In Malawi, only Blantyre City is classified as "metropolitan." Lilongwe City, Mzuzu City, and Zomba Municipality are classified as "other urban." The metropolitan areas in Egypt are Cairo, Alexandria, and El Suez. In Peru, the metropolitan area of Lima, including Callao, is categorized as "metropolitan." Urban and rural distinctions are made for other administrative categories in Egypt and Peru as appropriate.

Table 4—Job type, jobs in agriculture

	Overall	Male	Female	In lowest income tercile
Bangladesh				
Jessore slums				
Private wage/salary	38	34	50	n.a.
Public wage/salary	4	5	1	
Self-employed	57	59	49	
Unpaid	2	2	1	
Agriculture	1	1	1	
Tongi slums				
Private wage/salary	57	47	79	n.a.
Public wage/salary	1	1	0	
Self-employed	40	49	20	
Unpaid	3	3	1	
Agriculture	3	3	4	
Egypt				
Metro areas				
Private wage/salary	34	37	27	46
Public wage/salary	48	44	66	37
Self-employed	18	20	7	17
Agriculture	3	2	5	2
Other urban areas				
Private wage/salary	24	27	10	32
Public wage/salary	49	43	75	33
Self-employed	27	30	15	34
Agriculture	9	10	4	9
Ghana				
Accra				
Private wage	27	45	14	37
Public wage	11	18	6	11
Self-employed	60	37	77	51
Unpaid	2	1	3	2
Agriculture	2	5	0	1
Malawi				
Blantyre City				
Private	44	49	29	47
Public	31	28	41	26
Self-employed	20	18	25	21
Other	5	5	5	7
Agriculture	2	2	1	4
Other urban areas				
Private	28	28	29	30
Public	39	43	30	26
Self-employed	28	23	40	37
Other	5	7	1	7
Agriculture	8	5	15	15
Peru				
Lima				
Private	32	37	26	44
Public	12	9	15	6
Self-employed	44	48	38	41
Unpaid	13	6	22	8
Agriculture	9	14	1	19
Other urban areas				
Private	36	42	28	34
Public	13	13	14	8
Self-employed	40	38	42	45
Unpaid	11	7	17	13
Agriculture	7	9	4	14

Malawi. The differences between the importance of agriculture in the metropolitan and other areas were most dramatic in Mozambique. While in Maputo, agriculture provided 7 percent of jobs (still not negligible); agriculture was the main occupation for 63 percent of urban residents outside Maputo—and the main occupation for about 85 percent of women (Massingarela and Garrett 2002).

The Importance of the Formal Sector

Although as discussed below, the contribution of the informal sector is important, generally, most urban residents, even poor ones, do not work in the informal sector (if by that we mean the self-employed). Except in Accra and in cities in Peru, the majority—often a large majority—of urban dwellers work for wages or salaries. In Egypt and Malawi, 70 percent or more of jobs paid wages or salaries.

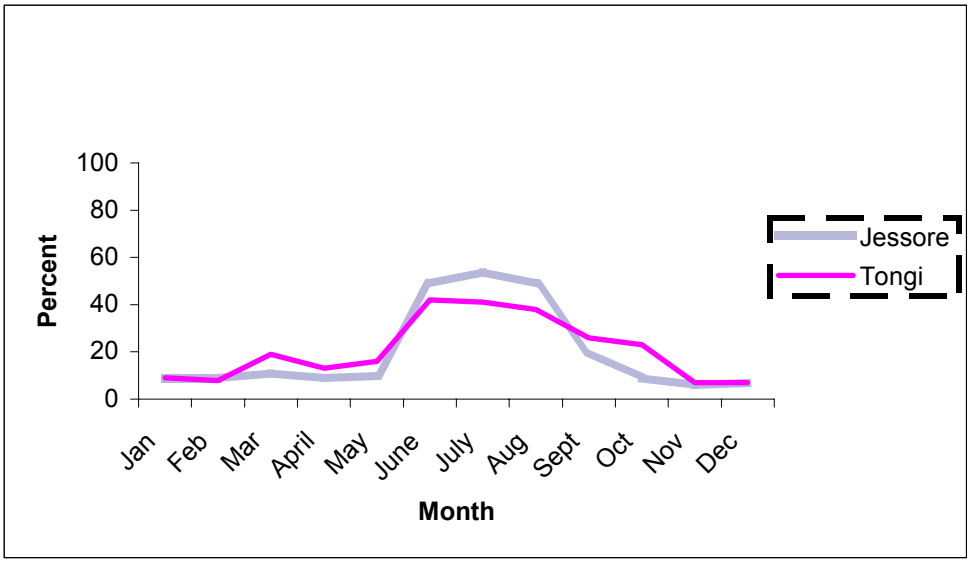
The public sector remains an important source of employment. In Egypt, half of all urban residents worked in the public sector, the location of employment for a large majority of women. Two-thirds of workingwomen in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez had jobs in the public sector, as did three-fourths of those outside metropolitan areas. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), public-sector employment still accounts for more than 20 percent of formal-sector wage employment in a number of African countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, and Tanzania (ILO 1998).

Seasonality

Urban incomes go up and down with the seasons just as in rural areas. Seasonality in urban areas, though, may hit the poor who work as day laborers, especially hard compared to those who work in offices or factories. Urban slum dwellers in Jessore and Tongi in Bangladesh, for example, could clearly mark which months were most and least difficult, with the peaks and troughs following the rainy and dry seasons (Figure 1). With rains, prices can increase as goods have a more difficult time arriving to the city from rural areas. For many, incomes fall: construction and street sales slow, and

rickshaw drivers find it harder to get fares. At the same time, rural dwellers who find it difficult to make ends meet during the rainy season may migrate to the city temporarily, increasing the competition for scarce jobs (Wood and Salway 2000). The key "season" may, of course, not be related to rains. Demand in the international market, which drives export industries that provide jobs for many, can gyrate with the holidays, such as Christmas, or traditional dates for presenting new styles or trends.

Figure 1—Seasonality in Bangladesh: Households claiming month as a "most difficult month"



4. The Importance of Personal Networks

The urban poor employ a vast array of livelihood strategies. Having a job is usually the most important. Because the poor need jobs, they often are willing to give up a safe working environment, social benefits, and job protections. They likely face long hours and the possibility of instant dismissal (Wood and Salway 2000). Getting a job depends on an individual's education and training, including formal education, as well as talents and skills acquired through apprenticeships and experience. Other personal characteristics, such as age, sex, and health, can affect the decision of an employer to hire

a worker. Overall economic growth and laws, regulations, conditions, and customs also shape demand, as do firm licensing procedures, labor benefits and protections, access to finance, marketing information, inputs, and social customs (including discriminatory ones). History and culture can limit job opportunities. Communities or ethnic groups may center on certain products or activities. In Bangladesh, due to social strictures, lower-caste Hindus who came to the country decades ago, called sweepers, know from birth that the job they will have is cleaning latrines.

Among the poor, few have much education or skills. Personal relations—patrons, relatives, neighbors—emerge as the key factor that distinguishes one similarly low-qualified jobseeker from the next (Wood and Salway 2000). "Anything is possible if your uncle is powerful" goes one Bangladeshi refrain (Opel 2000).

Getting a job, then, depends not only on a person's qualifications and ability to access formal hiring processes; it also depends on access to informal social networks of kin, ethnicity, caste, and community (Maxwell et al. 2000; DeHaan and Harriss 1998). Networks composed of family and neighbors provide a reservoir of trust and reciprocity in a dynamic city environment where people may not know each other well. For producers, these networks provide easy access to workers (often family members), credit, and local technology and knowhow. They provide a small but often stable market for goods. For those outside the group, however, networks can create barriers to competition.

For workers, networks ease the task of finding a job and provide training and business contacts (Meagher 1995; Opel 2000; Ypeij 2000). Because these networks are embedded in the social fabric of the neighborhood, group, or family, well-being depends on maintaining good relations with all these individuals, potentially leading to exploitation (Ypeij 2000). In a sort of social contract, the employer may keep the worker on during hard times, but he may also expect the worker to forgo benefits and accept low pay in return. Employers may also exert not-so-subtle pressures on workers to support particular political parties or candidates (Meagher 1995; Ypeij 2000). The home can thus emerge as a center of a carefully constructed net of productive and social relations

essential to employment. In this situation, eviction is a potentially devastating threat to the urban poor. Among slum dwellers in Bangladesh, gaining land security was one of the community's highest priorities (Sutter and Perine 1998).

As networks grow and economic development proceeds, kinship and ethnic networks—the social content of labor relations—begin to break down. Businesses link forward to sellers and backward to suppliers that go beyond neighborhood and family. As the importance of personal relations lessens, the implicit social contract weakens as the context of labor relations shifts from the personal to the legal and formal, as financial capital substitutes for social capital (Opel 2000; Ypeij 2000). Businesses begin to rely more on legal frameworks and markets that can function with anonymity. Opel (2000) notes how rickshaw owners' expectations of profits loosened social ties, leading them to lease rickshaws to those who could pay the market price rather than to neighbors or family. The same occurs with labor: social contacts tend to work only within a certain space, beyond which other mechanisms (such as education) signal employers about the quality of the labor they will hire. But for the poor and unskilled, these networks may be their only lifeline.

5. Women and the Workplace

The issues women face in the labor market are well known: discrimination, limits on movement, and the "double day" women spend at their job and then home and family. Although women's participation in the labor force has grown much faster than men's in recent decades (DeHaan 2000), still proportionally far fewer women work than men. Generally, women have less access to capital, unpaid family labor, markets, and social and formal networks (Ypeij 2000; Marcucci 2001). Women increase the resilience of the household in its ability to respond to shocks, frequently carrying the burden of having to work and devise innovative coping strategies (DeHaan 2000). Pradhan and van Soest (1997) found that, in Bolivia, lower earnings by the husband led to more hours of work by the wife.

In this environment, women tend to concentrate in certain types of jobs, generally those that require lower skill levels or can be done from home (Portes, Blitzer, and Curtis 1986). They are generally overrepresented in less secure and irregular jobs, often getting paid less than men for the same job (DeHaan 2000), and they often work as unpaid family labor. In Accra, women do all the street vending and make up 90 percent of small traders. While 60 percent of men there earn wages, 75 percent of women are self-employed (Levin et al. 1999).

Religious or cultural restrictions may restrict mobility or the kinds of jobs women can have (Simon 1998; Sutter and Perine 1998). Other less obvious institutional discrimination also restricts women's choices. In Bangladesh, the lack of housing or hostels for single women limits their mobility and may influence rural women's decisions to migrate to the city for work. Half of women working in the garment factories live less than 1 kilometer away, whereas only 20 percent of the men live so close (Asfar 1997). Similarly, lack of good quality childcare may restrict women's choices, forcing them to do informal work at home or not work at all.

The availability of good-quality childcare is a central issue in addressing equality of opportunity in the workplace. One concern raised about women working outside the home is whether this harms a child's development and nutritional status. The evidence on this issue is limited and mixed (Glick and Sahn 1998, for example). If women actually control the income they earn, they may increase amounts spent on food, health care, and education, offsetting negative impacts of potentially less attentive care. Women may also rearrange their work schedules around their children's needs. A study in Ghana, for instance, noted that mothers quit working when the child was young, and started again later when the child was older (Armar-Klemesu et al. 2000).

Women working outside the home challenges traditional conceptions of women's roles held by men and the women themselves. Zhang (1999) describes a process of empowerment in China as women workers, many of whom came to the city from rural areas, discovered new freedoms. They spent wages on their own personal items and hobbies. Their circle of social contacts widened. Policies must be in place to cut down

general barriers to gender equality as well, though, so that empowerment can lead to true equality of opportunity and choice. Programs must be careful to address specific skill constraints such as numeracy and literacy, widen market contacts, and not unintentionally increase women's workload (Marcucci 2001).

6. The Informal Sector: Dynamic or Dead End?

The notion of an informal sector emerged in the 1970s, disrupting ideas that the urban labor market was highly regulated, a concept that continued to drive some analyses even into the late 1980s (Rosenzweig 1988). As scholars and practitioners began to pay more attention to the informal sector, the amorphous nature of "informality" bedeviled their attempts to assess its role and importance in urban employment. In Latin America, researchers equated informality with legal marginality of the firm, rather than economic or social marginalization of the worker (Portes, Blitzer, and Curtis 1986). Other definitions revolved around the number of employees, or whether the firm incorporated its workers into the social security system (Funkhouser 1996; Simon 1998; Ranis and Stewart 1999). Official statistics did not generally distinguish between workers in these ways, which made determining the size and economic importance of the sector difficult. Later studies illuminated the dynamism and heterogeneity of the informal sector. Although workers tended to earn low wages, incomes of business owners in the sector could be 25 percent or more higher than those in the formal sector (Portes, Blitzer, and Curtis 1986).

A more nuanced view of the informal sector has now emerged. There may be a fairly static group of people who work at informal-sector jobs because they cannot access ones in the formal sector. Others in this group choose to work there (Yamada 1996). The informal sector can serve as a temporary adjustment mechanism during economic downturns or crisis. Yet many of the self-employed can have more flexible working hours and earn more money than in the formal sector (Pradhan and van Soest 1997). In

other words, rather than serving as a transit camp for disappointed migrants, the informal sector may itself be a destination.

Although the definition is not strictly comparable across studies, together available studies indicate that the informal sector provides dependable employment and makes substantial contributions to income and output (Bhattacharya 1998; Simon 1998).[3] In the 1990s, the informal sector represented 60–75 percent of urban employment in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and one-third in Costa Rica (Funkhouser 1996). It generated 60 percent of female employment in most West African cities (Meagher 1995) and was one-third of the urban labor force in Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa (Simon 1998). The data in this study show that in Accra, almost 80 percent of working women are self-employed. Still, in some countries, such as Egypt and Malawi, women are less likely to work in the informal sector than men. UN statistics suggest that the informal sector probably generated over 90 percent of all new jobs in African cities in the 1990s, and over 80 percent in Latin America. The newly industrializing countries of East Asia were an exception. There rapid growth in output and ties to international markets resulted in growing formal-sector employment (ILO 1998).

Nevertheless, data from the surveys included in this report suggest that it is misleading to think of practically all urban employment as being informal, or even the employment of most of the working poor (defining informal as self-employed or unpaid). They thus cast doubt on assertions of the consistent primacy of the informal sector, or at least caution that the discussion and statistics must be clear about definitions.

In fact, the poor are scattered among different occupations, job types, and sectors. The situation varies by country, but in Egypt and Malawi, most urban dwellers earn a wage or salary, regardless of city size, sex, or income level. In Peru, if unpaid workers

[3] In the end, Harriss, Kannan, and Rodgers (1990) develop probably the most convincing categorization of informal sector without using the terminology. They consider whether a job has legally defined social protections; whether it is fairly stable; and whether it is autonomous (say, self-employed), with larger and smaller amounts of capital. Such a categorization seems far more useful analytically than attempting to capture the myriad manifestations of informality in one term. However, as with the data used in this report, the data needed to make these kinds of distinction are often not collected.

are excluded, workers are closely split between formal and informal jobs, with formality predominating in Lima among the poor and among men in cities outside Lima. Around 40 percent of women are self-employed, with about 20 percent of them in unpaid jobs.

This discussion illustrates the importance of local context and cautions against generalities. It is also important to examine how likely it is for the poor to work in the informal sector. Surely, in some areas, such as the slums of Jessore, most employment among the poor is self-employment. But in other, similar areas, such as the slums of Tongi, paid employment predominates. In Tongi, 80 percent of women work for wages, mostly in the garment factories. In Egypt, one-third or less of the poor work in the informal sector. In Accra, only about half do. Generally, the pattern for the poor follows that of the general population, except in nonmetropolitan areas of Egypt and Malawi, where the figures are somewhat higher, and Accra, where the figure is somewhat lower.

ILO statistics make a stronger claim that poverty and informal employment overlap. For example, in Latin America, the proportion of the poorest 20 percent who work in the informal sector runs from about 65 percent in Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Paraguay, to 94 percent in Guatemala, 85 percent in Honduras, 87 percent in Panama, only 18 percent in Uruguay, and 57 percent Venezuela (ILO 1998).

Clearly, the informal sector is not small, homogeneous, or composed solely of the poor. Still, is it dead end or dynamic? Can an informal-sector job lead the poor out of poverty, or does it just perpetuate their subordination to a more formal protected sector and exploit their need to survive (Portes, Blitzer, and Curtis 1986; Meagher 1995)? An informal job can generate income, and during the 1990s, development organizations came to see the lack of credit as a principal constraint on the ability to start or expand small income-generating activities (IGAs). Thus, provision of credit, usually through NGOs such as the Grameen Bank, became the programmatic focus of efforts to assist those in the informal sector.

Although credit to individual producers or vendors in the informal sector can help sustainably increase incomes under appropriate conditions (Pitt and Khandker 1998), this approach does not seem capable of generating the growth to lift them and others from

poverty. For these small IGAs to become larger enterprises that can employ larger numbers of people also requires conditions that promote growth and linkages, such as a conducive economic environment, mechanisms to link producers with larger markets, and training. Impacts on employment then are condition on the opportunities provided by the environment (Diagne and Zeller 2001; Zeller et al. 2001).

Microenterprise does have the potential to generate sustainable, quality employment. In Latin America, by 1998, micro- or small enterprises (meaning a firm with fewer than 20 workers) provided over half of urban employment (Reinecke 2002). But, as with all entrepreneurial activity, the sector is dynamic and full of risk, especially for startup firms. The birthrate, but also the death rate, is high. Only 1 percent of those that started with fewer than five workers ever ended up with more than 10 (Reinecke 2002).

7. Trends: Globalization and Technology

A number of trends may change the face of urban employment in the next decades. Globalization, expressed as freer trade and financial liberalization, will open up opportunities for growth, but also expose businesses to global shocks, including those associated with capital outflows. To be competitive, urban labor will have to become more skilled, more flexible, and experience even less long-term security (DeHaan 2000). Workers will likely need to master a panoply of skills and accustom themselves to changing the nature of their jobs rapidly over time.

Technology will, in general, continue to displace jobs of higher-cost workers to countries where wages are lower. But the country environment is critical: if the transportation, communication, and physical infrastructure is good, and the political environment is stable, firms may find overall costs of doing business less than in a lower-wage country, permitting them to pay higher wages overall. If countries cannot maintain acceptable conditions, they run the risk of exacerbating global and national inequality as wages of the least skilled are forced lower and lower to be competitive. One of the

biggest challenges will be to support unskilled service workers or wage laborers, such as rickshaw drivers and construction workers, to transition to higher paying, more skilled positions.

Information technologies, including telecommunication, may allow decentralization of businesses from large cities to potentially lower-cost, smaller cities. This would build up smaller cities and strengthen links with rural areas. Although centralization of export and import shipping would continue, with good intercity networks, businesses can plan, design, manage, produce, package, and then ship their goods for sale in large metropolitan cities or abroad. The additional investment outside the large cities can be an important regional engine of growth, increasing employment and creating links with other sectors, including the agricultural sector. Urban growth in the secondary cities would then allow businesses to grow enough to sustain employment and even trade in their own right (ILO 1998).

With increasing urbanization, women are likely to form a larger and larger percentage of the workforce. Policies will have to pay close attention to their needs and to the constraints they face if economies are to enjoy the greatest benefits of their contributions.

8. Policies and Programs

Policies and programs must acknowledge and respond to the social, economic, and political factors that affect urban workers at the global, national, city, local, household, and even individual level. They must recognize that the effects in one aspect of the lives of the poor, say in health or education, are often tied directly to other aspects, such as the ability to earn a good income. They must also be aware of the links between national and international markets and between rural and urban areas. Here, governments must plan through a regional or local lens, not only a national one, that understands and promotes urban-rural synergies, synergies that mostly revolve around agriculture and that

are particularly important for poverty reduction and the health of secondary cities and market towns.

National government needs to set macroeconomic and trade policies so as not to discriminate against labor. Government must address the ability of the economy to generate jobs and improve urban productivity, often through significant investments in human capital and market information. Often the national government must also take on the task of reducing discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, caste, or gender. National government can also ensure that infrastructure connects secondary cities to markets, and it can provide the basic infrastructure itself within the city. Sometimes, the first step is to deconcentrate national investment from the primary cities to the secondary cities where more people live (Rondinelli 1982).

Cities can work to counter national-level distortions. They can ensure implementation and modification of national policies to local conditions. Stark differences in needs and possibilities exist even within the same city. Overall, authorities can ensure the city works in terms of public services, business promotion, and urban planning. Municipal authorities must work to end bureaucratic entanglements, corruption, and harassment of legitimate businesses. Housing and property rights must be understood, protected, and secure. Along with partners in the private and nongovernmental sectors, they can provide credit, job placement, business training, and informational exchanges among firms. The government can support analysis to identify labor demand, provide training to meet those demands, and establish informative and non-exploitative mechanisms to link companies with qualified workers. Authorities should understand work and transportation patterns, and improve efficiency in land use and transportation and communications infrastructure. Good governance will go a long way to improving conditions.

Governments must be careful not to add to the burdens of small businesses. Policies and regulations should take firm size into account. Support programs, such as subsidized interest rate programs, should not favor large enterprises disproportionately. In any case, policies that favor labor over capital are more likely to be in tune with the

comparative advantage of the country and encourage growth in small and medium businesses. Of course, policies should not sacrifice workplace safety: a trade-off between business development and enforcing basic labor standards may be necessary but not devastating. If all companies abide by the same rules, the impact will be negligible and workers will benefit as well.

The urban worker's dependence on cash means a greater reliance on and vulnerability to the market (Amis and Rakodi 1994). A successful employment strategy should aim to protect the assets of the poor and reduce the uncertainties of employment and income. Policies and programs should improve the capabilities of the individual's own labor, the poor person's greatest asset, through good education and training. They should also help secure a healthy environment and access to good health care, reducing the likelihood of illness. Improving access to operational capital helps the firm smooth peaks and troughs and, potentially, expand to employ more workers and make increasing demands on suppliers. A recent study of microenterprise, in fact, suggested that credit, rather than harassment from authorities, was by far the largest obstacle to expansion (Simon 1998).

The emphasis on getting the economic environment right builds on the knowledge that the poor are not passive. They do not lack industriousness, initiative, or ingenuity. But they must not only have tools, such as training and credit, they must have an environment in which they can put them to good use. The strategies outlined here may help authorities to create those conditions.

9. Conclusions

This paper highlights some aspects of urban employment that are well known and others that many researchers and policymakers may find surprising. Low unemployment rates suggest that jobs are "available," but the fact that people in cities must *earn* a cash living to survive cautions against assuming participation is much of a choice. However, similar participation rates among lower and upper income classes strongly suggest that

quality jobs with adequate remuneration, not just more jobs, are necessary to take the poor out of poverty.

Some findings suggest that current data-gathering methods need to delve more deeply into urban employment strategies. The data on participation rates suggest that not all of the poor work, with women's participation rates particularly low. And few of the poor seem to have more than one job at a time. If the poor must work to survive, why are participation rates low? Have many withdrawn from the labor force in frustration or desperation? If so, how then do they survive? Are surveys failing to capture the range and number of jobs of the poor? And what are the special factors affecting women? Gender discrimination? Lack of access to job networks, or lack of quality, accessible childcare?

The paper also notes the importance of the formal sector, especially the government, and of the agricultural and food systems in providing jobs, even in urban settings. Interruptions to work from seasonality, illness, or political strife can be significant and can have a strong negative impact, especially on the incomes of the poor. Social networks play important roles in securing jobs, although the gatekeeper who controls information about and access to jobs has a potential to exploit the relationship. The public sector can support training to produce qualified job applicants, an especially great need during globalization and the rapid spread of technology, and help create fair mechanisms to link them with labor demand.

The constraints and catalysts to better urban employment are multilevel, multicultural, and transgeographical. Consequently, policies and programs take a holistic view of livelihood strategies and work at all these levels. Future analyses and policy choices need to pay more attention to important aspects of urban employment noted here, so policymakers and development practitioners can better support the goals and initiatives of urban dwellers and ultimately help them to secure better livelihoods.

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